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Research Summary

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WHAT MAKES A CHILD MOLESTER?

Question: What are the characteristics of individuals who sexually abuse children?

Background: Sexual abuse of children is one of the crimes that induces strong emotional reactions from the public. Although the reported rates of child sexual abuse have been declining since the early 1990s, it remains all too common. In 2006, 12,384 cases of sexual crimes against children were reported to Canadian police, and many more were unreported.

Many policies intended to reduce child sexual abuse are directed toward controlling the behaviour of known offenders (e.g., incarceration, treatment, community supervision). Most incidents of child sexual abuse, however, are committed by individuals who have no prior convictions for sexual offences. Each new generation produces its own cohort of offenders. Consequently, sustained prevention efforts require an understanding of the background characteristics that predispose individuals to molesting children, and appropriate interventions.

Method: In order to understand the characteristics of child molesters, a comprehensive literature review was conducted in collaboration with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia. In total, 89 studies were examined that compared child molesters to non-offenders, non-sexual offenders, or sexual offenders against adults (rapists). Each finding was converted into a common effect size and combined through meta-analysis.

Answer: Like most offenders, child molesters are mostly males from difficult family backgrounds, who have a range of behavioural problems as both children and adults. Compared to non-offenders, child molesters are more likely to exhibit disruptive behaviour, substance abuse, aggression, poor social skills, depression and dysfunctional intimate relationships. The major factors that differentiate child molesters from other offenders concern sexual deviancy and attitudes tolerant of adult-child sex.

Interestingly, the developmental factor that most strongly differentiates child molesters from non-sexual offenders is a history of being sexually victimized during childhood. Although a history of abuse is associated with a large increase in the relative risk of becoming a sexual abuser, most victims of child sexual abuse do not become abusers, and most abusers were not abused themselves. There is no single risk factor that determines whether somebody will eventually sexually abuse a child.

There are few differences between child molesters and rapists in the amount of

behavioural problems, and the small differences that do exist do not consistently favour one group or the other.

Policy Implications:

1. Given the similarity between general offenders and child molesters, primary prevention programs that are effective for general offending are likely to be effective in reducing child sexual abuse. In particular, efforts to reduce the onset of sexual abuse perpetration could benefit from the well-established family and parenting programs designed for general delinquency.
2. The most intensive services should be directed to youth who have a substantial risk of future sexual offending due to a concentration of known risk factors.
3. Reductions in recidivism by known child molesters should also reduce the number of children (primarily boys) who will eventually become child molesters themselves.

Source: Whitaker, D. J., Le, B., Hanson, R.K., Baker, C.K., McMahon, P., Ryan, G., Klein, A., & Rice, D.D. (2008). Risk factors for the perpetration of child sexual abuse: A review and meta-analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect,* 32, 529-548.

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